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Support for Rural Colorado Schools Survey

Opportunities for Philanthropy to Address District Needs



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Introduction

Whether in the western region of the state or the plains of the northeast corner, the ground has continued to shift under the feet of Colorado's rural charter school and district leaders. Efforts to understand the needs of Colorado's school communities early in the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced challenges with providing internet access, digital devices, and personal protective equipment, and meeting the basic needs of low-income families hit hard by the economic impacts of the pandemic.¹ Since then, vaccines have rolled out, many schools have reopened for in-person learning, and the federal government has directed \$190 billion in relief to support schools and students in recovery. As the pandemic has shifted from an acute crisis to a persistent and destructive threat, the needs and challenges facing rural Colorado communities have evolved. Unfortunately, these needs are no less profound.

In a constantly changing landscape, the perspective of local charter school and district leaders is essential to understanding and supporting on-the-ground needs. But it's hard to discern leaders' perspectives through standard reporting requirements or anecdotal media accounts. To shed light on the needs facing students and schools in rural Colorado, Bellwether Education Partners conducted the *Support for Rural Colorado Schools* survey in October 2021. We asked rural charter school and district leaders in Colorado to tell us about the most urgent challenges they face and the kinds of support they'd find most useful. We also sought to understand how philanthropic funders in Colorado could best support them at a time when schools have access to an abundance of public relief dollars but limited time and capacity to envision or implement their use.

This report shares new data about the needs of students and schools in rural Colorado and the challenges and opportunities for collaboration among rural leaders and philanthropic funders. It also recommends five ways philanthropic funders in Colorado can best support rural students and schools in the months and years ahead:

- 1 Bring funding, networks, and creative solutions to address urgent staffing needs and shortages.
- 2 Keep grant application processes and reporting requirements at a minimum.
- 3 Stay flexible in grantmaking priorities to provide support across the myriad challenges rural communities are facing.
- 4 Support rural charter schools and districts in navigating the sustainability of their efforts, whether funded by philanthropic or public dollars.
- 5 Provide non-monetary support, including opportunities to connect and collaborate with those who are outside the school or district but equally dedicated to supporting the success of rural students.

Sidebar 1

Key Findings From the *Support for Rural Colorado Schools Survey*

- Rural Colorado charter school and district leaders most often cited addressing staffing needs and shortages, providing mental health or emotional support services for students and/or families, and providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction as their **most urgent needs**.
- Overall, more than six in 10 charter school and district leaders reported that addressing **staffing needs or shortages** is among their three most urgent needs; 34% cited it as their most urgent need.
- While most charter school and district leaders said they plan to use public funding to meet their most urgent needs, they also reported **a need for additional financial support**.
- A large majority of charter school and district leaders **aren't aware of philanthropic funding** that would help address their most urgent needs. Nearly all said they are unaware of funding opportunities to address staffing needs or shortages.
- Half of rural schools and districts **don't partner with philanthropic organizations**, though this ranges widely from region to region across Colorado.
- Many leaders of schools and districts that don't partner with funders cite **lack of sustainability and capacity to apply for funding** as key reasons; leaders of schools and districts that do partner with funders cite these same reasons as challenges of doing so.
- Many leaders who have worked with philanthropic organizations say they've benefited from opportunities for **flexible funding, positive relationships with program officers, and networking with others**.

Survey Data and Analysis

Eighty-one leaders responded to Bellwether’s *Support for Rural Colorado Schools* survey in October 2021 across districts and charter schools, small and large districts, and eight geographic regions.

The response rates for the survey are insufficient to support confident claims about the needs, challenges, or perspectives of rural district leaders across Colorado. The sample isn’t representative and should be interpreted with care. That said, the data provides insights into the perspectives and experiences of the 81 survey respondents. It can also provide insights for philanthropic funders eager to help meet profound student needs.

Note: In this report, we use the terms *district* and *district leaders* to refer to both traditional public school districts and charter schools. To discuss the differences between the two school leader roles, we use the terms *superintendent* to describe the leader of a traditional public school district and *charter school leader* to refer to the principal, director, head of school, or other executive leader of a charter school.

Table 1

Support for Rural Colorado Schools Survey Response Rates^{2,3}

Type of Leader	Number of Rural Leaders in State	Number of Survey Responses	Survey Response Rate
Charter School Leader	31	11	35%
Superintendent	146	70	48%
Total	177	81	46%

Region	Number of Rural Districts in State	Number of Survey Responses	Survey Response Rate
Metropolitan	4	2	50%
North Central	15	8	53%
Northeast	32	13	41%
Northwest	19	11	58%
Pikes Peak	15	8	53%
Southeast	28	9	32%
Southwest	22	20	91%
West Central	11	10	91%

Rural Designation	Number of Rural Districts in State	Number of Survey Responses	Survey Response Rate
Small Rural	107	58	59%
Large Rural	39	23	54%

Rural Districts Are Pressed With the Need to Address Staffing Shortages and Support Students and Families

When asked to identify their needs, charter school and district leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:

- 1 Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
- 2 Providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families.
- 3 Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction (Figure 1).

Teacher shortages have long plagued rural districts in Colorado and have worsened since the pandemic began.⁴ Data from the *Colorado Educator Shortage Survey* indicates that, over the course of the pandemic, rural districts have experienced an increase in the number of unfilled positions at the beginning of the school year, from 157 in 2019 to 238 in 2020 to 256 in 2021.⁵ Similar trends appear for the number of positions filled by short-term substitutes. Statewide, there have been shortages in other vital roles, including bus drivers,⁶ substitute teachers,⁷ and paraprofessionals⁸ this year. Finally, a representative sample of district leaders⁹ across the country predicts that shortages for both certified teachers and other essential staff, including bus drivers and substitute teachers, will intensify over the next year.

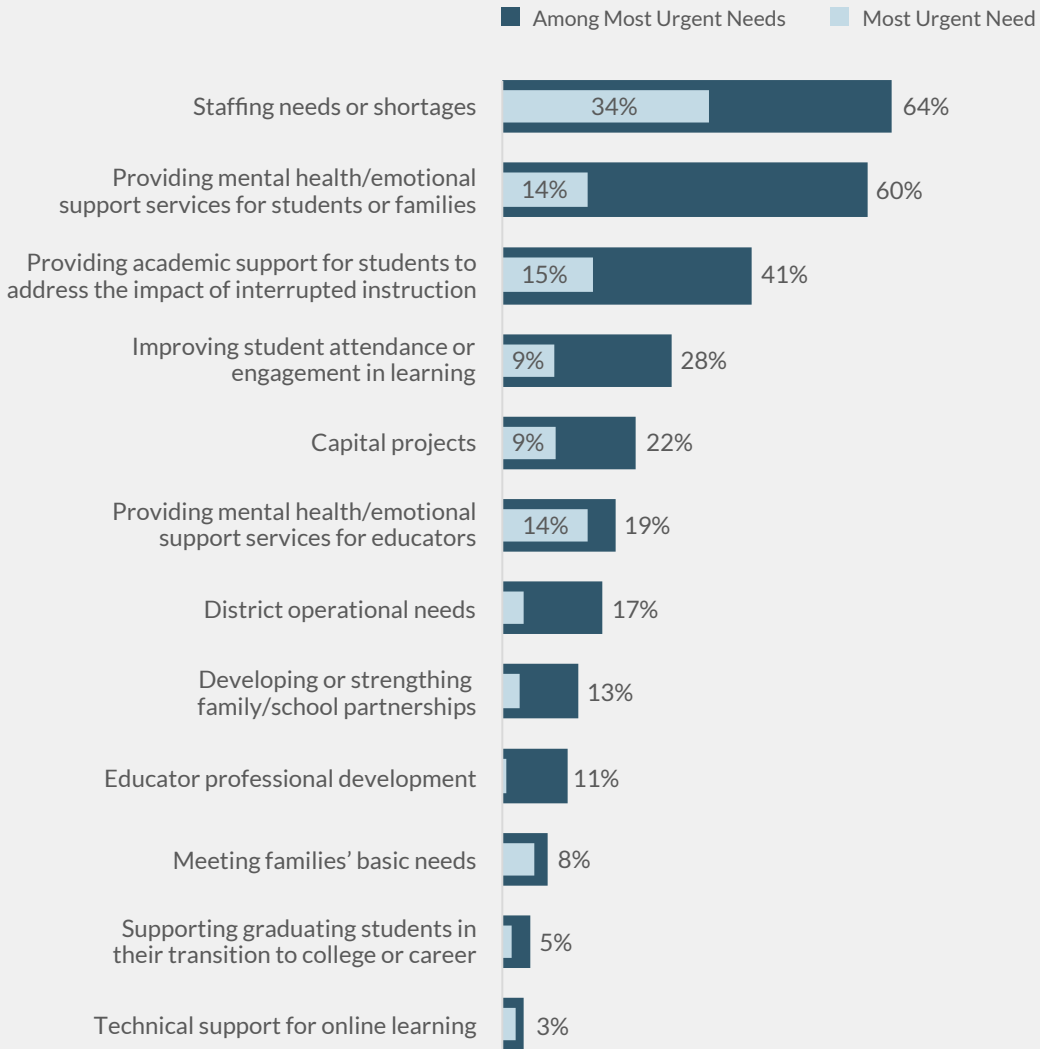
Given these trends, it's unsurprising that more than six in 10 district leaders reported that addressing staffing needs or shortages is among their most urgent needs, and 34% cited it as their most urgent need.

Superintendents and charter school leaders cited the same three most urgent needs, but these varied slightly when ranked (Figure 2). Superintendents most often cited staffing needs or shortages as their most urgent need, while charter school leaders were significantly more likely to report academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction as their most urgent need. Across both groups, approximately six in 10 listed mental health or emotional support services for students or families as a top-three need.

Figure 1

Perceptions of Most Urgent Needs

Which of the following describe the most urgent needs your district or school is facing?

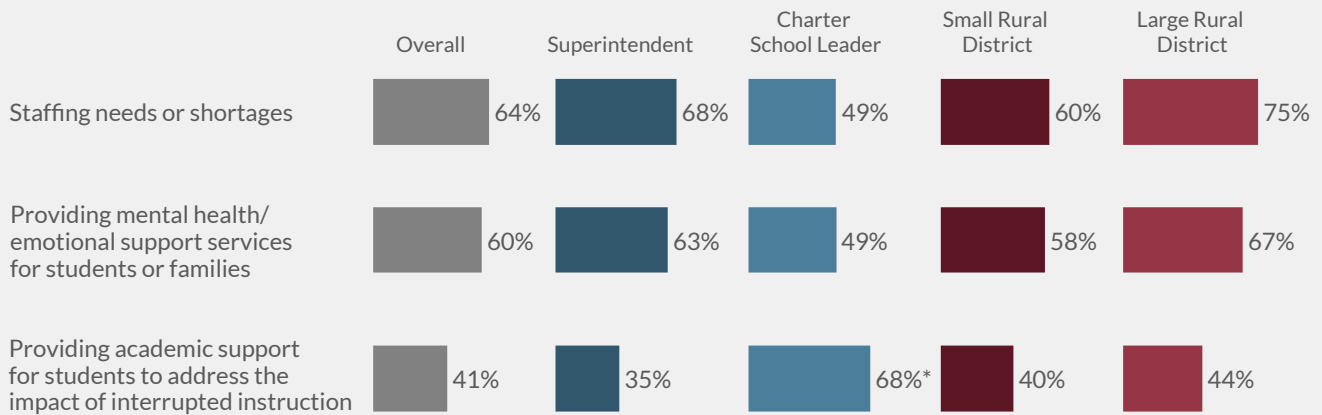


Note: Respondents were asked to select three responses. The figure doesn't depict an "other" category, which five respondents selected. "Other" urgent needs reported by respondents included increasing pay for employees (n=3), improving educator morale (n=1), and developing programming to meet the needs of the community (n=1).

Among the needs that were *not* most urgent overall, there were significant differences between groups. While providing mental health and emotional support services for educators was not among the three most urgent needs overall, superintendents were significantly more likely to select it (23%). In fact, no charter school leaders selected it. Additionally, charter school leaders were significantly more likely to indicate that funding capital projects was their single most urgent need (27%). Leaders of small rural districts were also significantly more likely than leaders of large rural districts to indicate that improving student attendance or engagement in learning was among their most urgent needs (34%).

Figure 2 > Perceptions of Most Urgent Needs, by District Leader Role and Rural Designation

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?

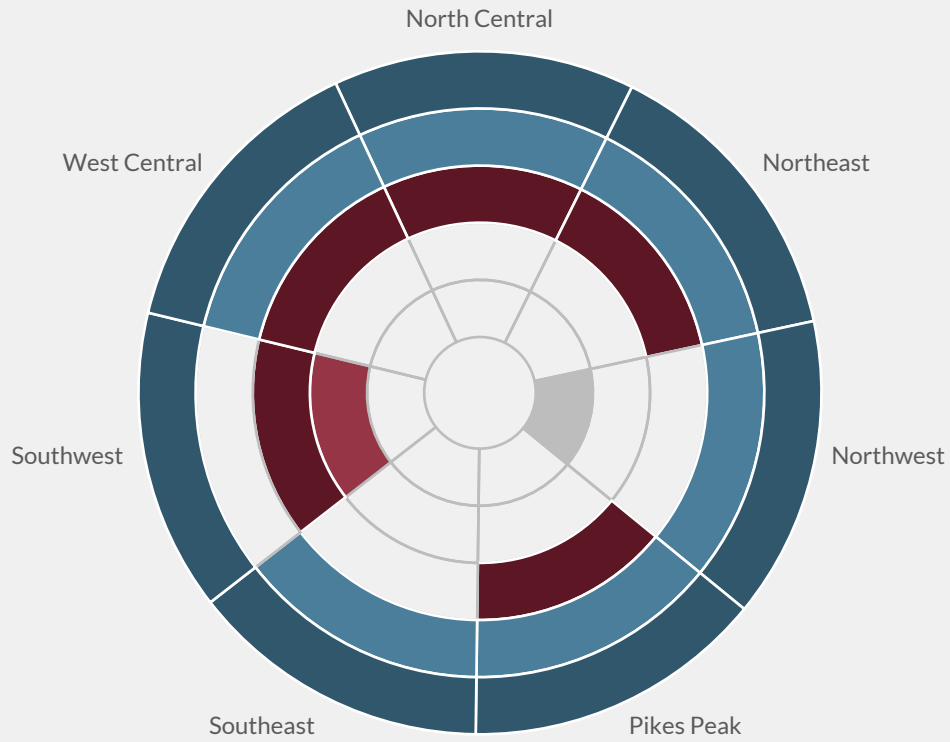


Note: Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in survey responses between two groups.

The most urgent needs among each rural region¹⁰ were relatively similar, with a few outliers (Figure 3). Leaders in the Pikes Peak region were more likely than leaders in other regions to cite staffing needs or shortages. Leaders in Colorado’s Northwest region were more likely than leaders in other regions to report that providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families was among their most urgent needs. Leaders in the Northwest region were also more likely to say that providing mental health/emotional support services for educators was among their most urgent needs. Finally, leaders in the Southwest region were more likely to indicate that improving student attendance or engagement in learning was among their most urgent needs. Results for the Metropolitan region aren’t included because of the low sample size.¹¹

Figure 3 > Perceptions of Most Urgent Needs, by Region¹²

Which of the following describe the most urgent needs your district or school is facing?



- Addressing staffing needs or shortages
 - Providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families
 - Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction
 - Improving student attendance or engagement in learning
 - Providing mental health/emotional support services for educators
- Selected by more respondents
 Selected by fewer respondents

Note: See Appendix B for more detailed survey results by region.

Rural Colorado Districts Plan to Meet Urgent Needs With Public Funding

As a way of understanding gaps that philanthropic organizations might fill, we asked district leaders to indicate whether they plan to use public funding, including federal COVID-19 relief funds, to meet the most urgent needs in their school or district (Figure 4). Unsurprisingly, given the scale of federal relief dollars, a large majority of district leaders intended to use public funds to meet their most urgent needs. Overall, only 12% of respondents indicated that they would not use public funds to address staffing needs and shortages; even smaller percentages of leaders indicated that they would not use public funds to meet their other most urgent needs.

While the percentages are small, the results beg the question of how superintendents and charter school leaders will address their most urgent needs, if not with public dollars. They may plan to use private or philanthropic dollars to meet these needs, or this may indicate that funding of any kind isn't the barrier. In the case of staffing needs or shortages, for instance, additional funding is unlikely to help if there aren't sufficient candidates in the community to fill open roles.

Some notable variations exist between district and charter leaders and between large and small rural districts. Across all three most urgent needs, for instance, charter school leaders who chose providing academic support for students as an urgent need were significantly more likely than superintendents to indicate that they *don't* plan to use federal COVID-19 relief funds to address them.

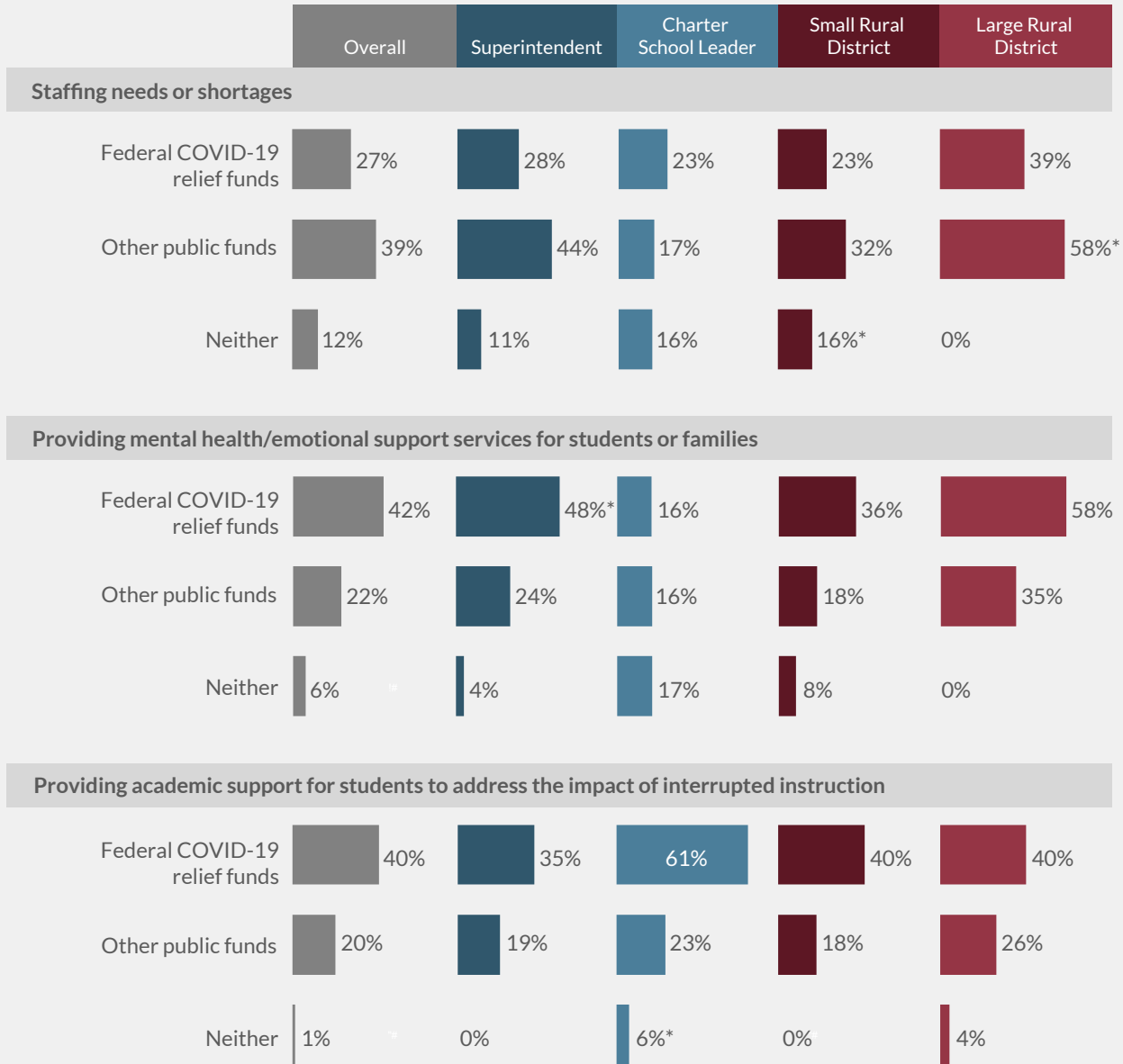
While 4% of leaders of large rural schools and districts indicated that they don't plan to use public funds to provide academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction, this is still a relatively small share. For each of their other most urgent needs, 100% of leaders of large rural districts indicated that they plan to use public funds.

Small rural districts also tended to say that they plan to use public funds to address their most urgent needs. Notably, while 60% of leaders of small rural districts indicated that staffing needs or shortages are among their most urgent needs, 16% of those leaders said that they don't plan to use public funds to address those needs (while no leaders of large rural districts indicated the same). Again, this could suggest that the staffing needs and shortages — especially in small rural communities — may not be challenges that more funding alone can solve.

Figure 4 > Plans to Use Public Funding to Meet Needs

Do you plan to use public funding to meet the most urgent needs in your district or school?

Response: Yes



Note: Respondents could choose “Federal COVID-19 relief funds,” “Other public funds,” both, or “Neither.” Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in survey responses between two groups.

A Large Majority of District Leaders Aren't Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Help Address Urgent Needs

We also asked district leaders to indicate whether they are aware of philanthropic funding that could help them address their most urgent needs; most respondents were not (Figure 5). Most notably, few leaders were aware of funding to help them address staffing needs or shortages (1%), the most urgent need among all respondents. There are no statistically significant differences between district and charter school leaders or between small and large rural schools and districts.

Figure 5 Awareness of Philanthropic Support to Meet Needs

Are you aware of philanthropic funding that could help you address the following needs?

Response: No

	Overall	Superintendent	Charter School Leader	Small Rural District	Large Rural District
Staffing needs or shortages	99%	99%	99%	99%	96%
Providing mental health/emotional support services for students or families	59%	55%	80%	64%	47%
Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction	71%	73%	67%	70%	75%

While Most District Leaders Plan to Use Public Funding to Meet Their Most Urgent Needs, Many Nonetheless Say Additional Financial Support Would Help

When asked about their most pressing needs, nearly seven in 10 district leaders said that increased capacity or staffing would be helpful – not surprising, considering the urgent need to address staffing challenges (Figure 2). The large gap (33 points) between what leaders rated as the two most helpful kinds of support and the other choices again highlights the pressure leaders feel related to funding and staffing.

More surprising – considering the significant relief dollars flowing to schools and districts – is that nearly eight in 10 district leaders said additional financial support would be helpful (Figure 6). Publicly available data indicates that rural districts received an average of \$2,896¹³ per pupil in relief dollars in the 2020-2021 fiscal year.¹⁴ This is a 26% increase over the average per-pupil funding in rural districts. While this is a sizeable

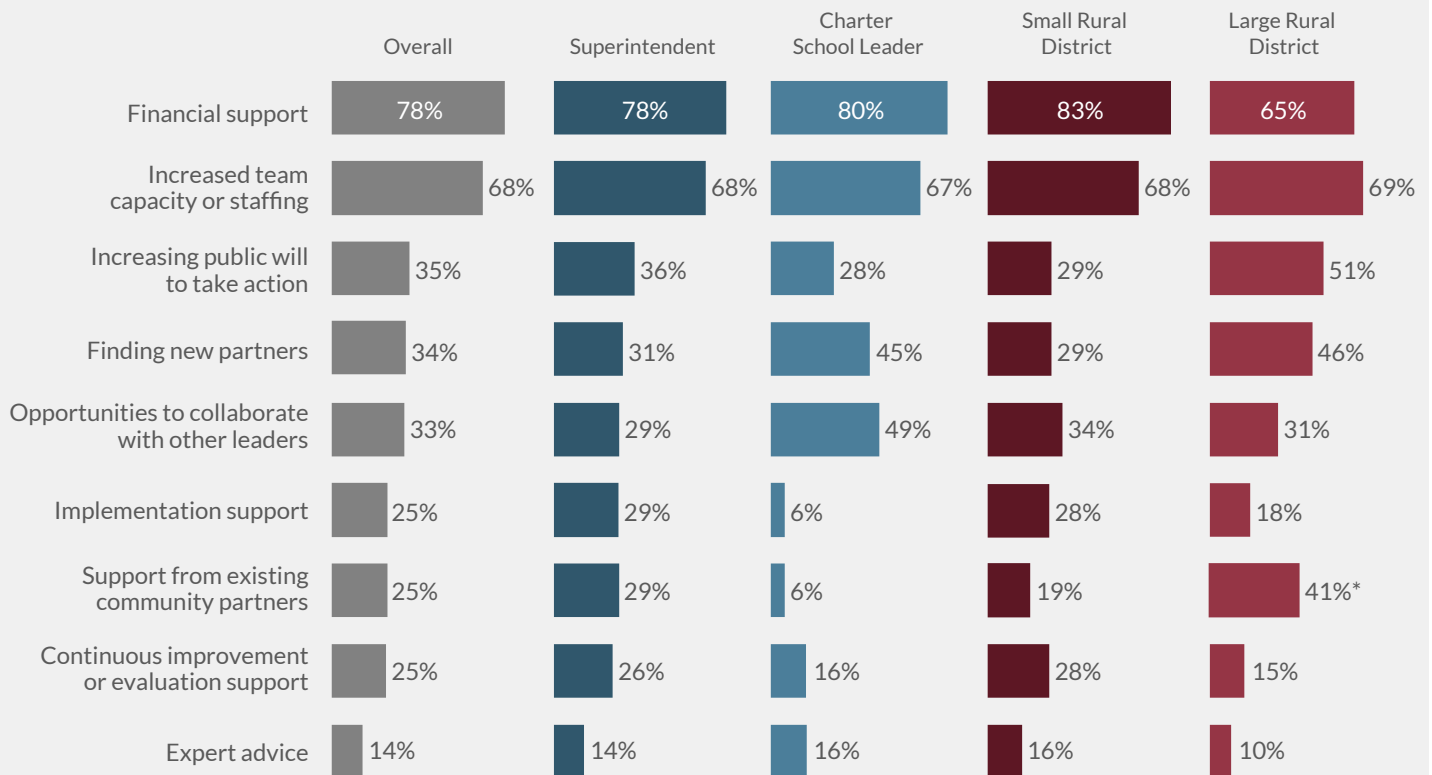
increase in funding overall, 40% of the 146 rural districts in the state received less than \$2,000 per pupil in relief funding; two-thirds of these districts were small rural districts.

Past research on rural schools has highlighted significant challenges they experience with economies of scale.¹⁵ In our survey, leaders of small rural districts were more likely to say that financial support would be helpful, though this difference is not statistically significant. Additionally, the charter school law in Colorado stipulates that these schools receive equitable funding to district schools, but this doesn't always translate into practice.¹⁶ More charter school leaders than superintendents also indicated additional financial support would be helpful, though the difference isn't statistically significant. In both cases, the fact that small rural schools and charter schools often face the most financial barriers could help explain the persistent desire for additional funding.

Another potential explanation is district leaders foresee the funding cliff coming a few years down the line, when relief funds are fully expended, and are eager for more sustained financial support built into state funding formulae. In fact, the Colorado legislature is considering changes to school funding during the 2022 legislative session.¹⁷

Figure 6 Perceptions of Most Helpful Supports for Rural Schools

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?



Note: The figure doesn't depict an "Other" category, which two respondents selected. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in survey responses between two groups.

Beyond team capacity or staffing and financial support, leaders were most likely to indicate that it would be helpful to have support from outside their buildings. Across all respondents, about one-third selected types of support that involve engaging with others, including finding new partners and opportunities to collaborate with other leaders. Moreover, 35% of respondents indicated that it would be helpful to increase public will to take action to address needs, which could indicate a desire for systemic solutions (policy or otherwise) that are outside the control of a charter school leader or superintendent. Finally, district leaders in large rural districts were significantly more likely to report that building support among existing community partners would be helpful to them.

About Half of Rural Charter Leaders and Superintendents Don't Partner With Philanthropic Organizations

One half of all survey respondents indicated that their schools or districts don't partner with philanthropic organizations (Table 2). This includes statistically comparable percentages of superintendents and charter school leaders, as well as leaders from small and large rural districts.

Table 2

Percentage of Districts That Partner With Philanthropic Organizations

Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?

Response: Yes



Overall	Superintendent	Charter School Leader	Small Rural District	Large Rural District
50%	47%	61%	44%	66%

Depending on district leaders' responses to whether their schools or districts partner with philanthropic organizations, we asked a series of follow-up questions to better understand their experiences. For leaders who don't partner with philanthropic organizations, we asked them why. For those who do partner with philanthropic organizations, we asked them about the challenges and benefits of doing so.

Rural Charter Leaders and Superintendents Cite Lack of Capacity, Difficulty Identifying Opportunities, and Difficulty Sustaining Grant-Funded Work as Key Barriers to Partnering With Philanthropic Organizations

When asked why they don't partner with philanthropic organizations, 37% of district leaders indicated that they don't have enough capacity or resources to apply for funding; one-third indicated that it's hard to identify philanthropic opportunities (Figure 7). Specifically regarding the capacity or resources needed to apply for funding, leaders in small rural districts were statistically more likely to cite this as a barrier. This fact aligns with the broadly recognized challenge that smaller schools and districts often have less administrative capacity than their larger counterparts; the leaders of small schools or districts often wear many hats and lack a staff person dedicated to grant writing.

More than one in four survey respondents also indicated that they don't partner with philanthropic organizations in part because it is hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out. This may indicate a sensitivity to funding cliffs. If the salience of funding cliffs is top of mind for rural charter and district leaders regarding philanthropic dollars, it may also imply a concern about the funding cliff in federal relief dollars and a belief that increased funding in the longer term is also necessary.

While less commonly cited, many respondents also selected options related to flexibility, either by directly naming that the uses of philanthropic funds aren't flexible or by selecting related options, such as lack of opportunities for general operating support or a misalignment of goals between a grant program and the district or school.

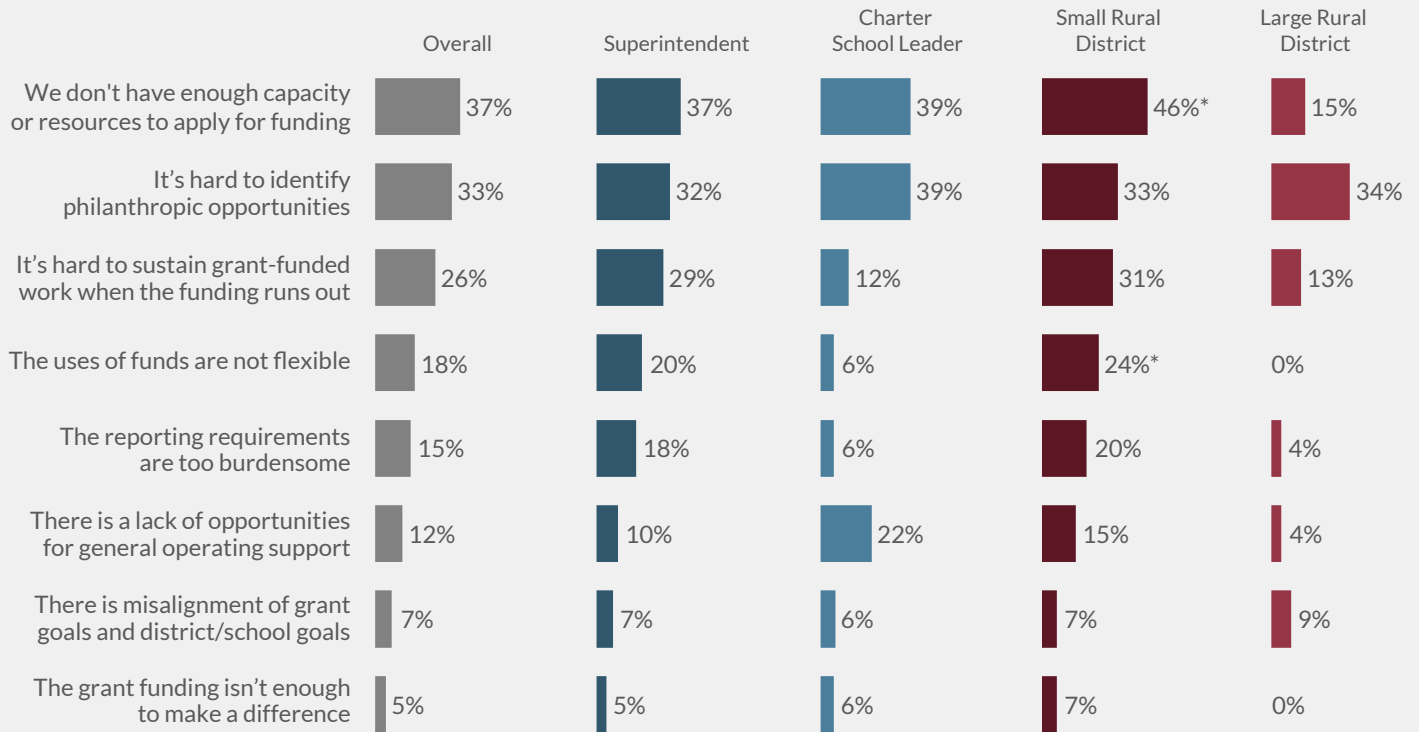
Between rural superintendents and charter school leaders, the differences in responses aren't statistically significant. However, charter school leaders were slightly more likely to cite constraints on capacity and resources and difficulty identifying opportunities as reasons for not partnering with philanthropic organizations, but fewer cited the lack of flexibility in the uses of funds.

A couple statistical differences emerged between small and large rural schools and districts. For instance, nearly half of small rural district leaders indicated that they don't have enough capacity or resources to apply for funding, compared to just 15% of large rural district leaders. Moreover, leaders of small rural districts were more likely to indicate that the uses of philanthropic funds aren't flexible (24%).

Figure 7

Reasons for Not Partnering With Philanthropic Organizations

Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?



Note: The figure doesn't depict an "Other" category, which two respondents selected. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in survey responses between two groups.

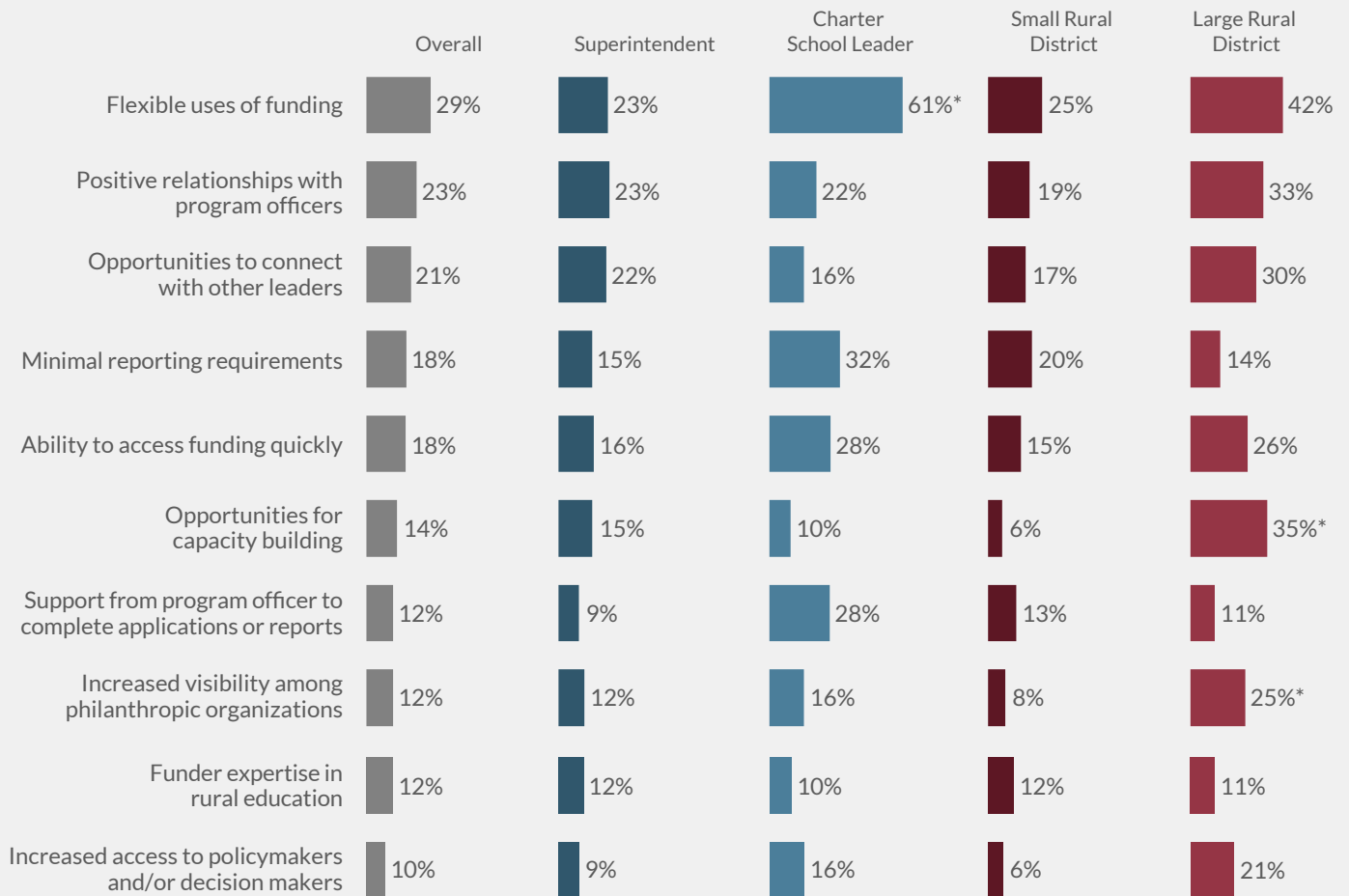
Among Those Who Do Partner With Philanthropic Organizations, Rural Charter District Leaders Cite Flexible Funding, Positive Relationships, and Networking With Other Leaders as Top Benefits

Our survey asked leaders whose schools or districts partner with philanthropic organizations about the benefits they've experienced from those collaborations (Figure 8). Leaders were most likely to cite flexible uses of funding as a benefit; charter school leaders were significantly more likely to cite this benefit than superintendents (61% and 23%, respectively). District leaders also reported that positive relationships with program officers and networking with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges are other benefits of philanthropic partnerships.

Figure 8

Benefits of Working With Philanthropic Organizations

What benefits have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations?



Note: The figure doesn't depict an "Other" category, which three respondents selected. One respondent selected the category "None." Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in survey responses between two groups.

While there was only one statistically significant difference among the responses of superintendents and charter school leaders, there were also differences in the order of their most frequent choices (Table 3). Charter leaders were more likely to cite the benefits of minimal reporting requirements (32%) and the ability to access funding quickly (28%), while superintendents were more likely to cite opportunities to connect with others doing similar work (22%).

Table 3 > Benefits of Working With Philanthropic Organizations, by District Leader Role

Superintendent	Charter School Leader
Flexible uses of funding	Flexible uses of funding
Positive relationships with program officers	Minimal reporting requirements
Opportunities to connect with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges	Ability to access funding quickly
Ability to access funding quickly	Support from program officer to complete applications or reports

Leaders of large rural districts were significantly more likely than leaders of small rural districts to cite opportunities for capacity building (35%) and increased visibility among other funders (25%) as benefits. Both groups of leaders pointed to flexible uses of funding as top benefits (Table 4). Though the difference isn't significant, small rural district leaders – like charter school leaders – often cited minimal reporting requirements as benefits of working with philanthropic organizations, reinforcing the idea that the smallest schools and districts face some of the largest challenges with the capacity and resources necessary to secure and manage philanthropic funding.

Table 4 > Benefits of Working With Philanthropic Organizations, by Rural Designation

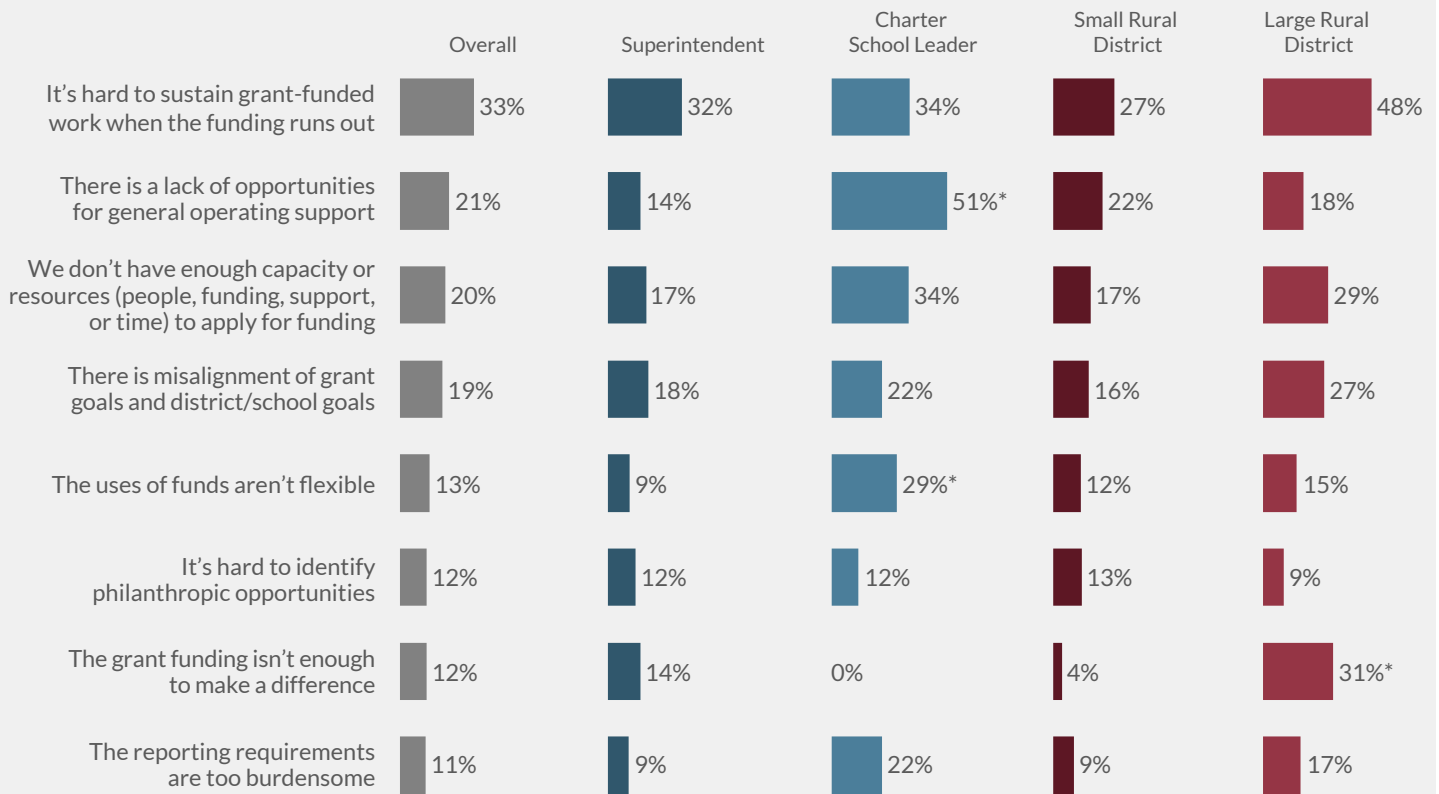
Small Rural District	Large Rural District
Flexible uses of funding	Flexible uses of funding
Minimal reporting requirements	Opportunities for capacity building
Positive relationships with program officers	Positive relationships with program officers
Opportunities to connect with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges	Opportunities to connect with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges

Rural Charter and District Leaders Cite Lack of Sustainability and Capacity as Top Challenges in Working With Philanthropic Organizations

In addition to reporting benefits of working with philanthropic partners, we also asked rural charter school leaders and superintendents to report challenges they've experienced in doing so (Figure 9). Overall, leaders were most likely to report that the sustainability of grant funding is a challenge, both in terms of sustaining work beyond grant periods and in a lack of general operating support. They also cite capacity to apply for funding as a challenge. This suggests that rural schools and districts that receive grant funding strain their capacity to secure it and may do so less regularly than they would if they had greater capacity or resources. It may also suggest the increased pressure rural charter district leaders may feel to find additional funds to sustain a program or initiative initially supported by philanthropy.

Figure 9 Challenges of Working With Philanthropic Organizations

What challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations?



Note: The figure doesn't depict an "Other" category, which no respondents selected. Four respondents selected the category "None." Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in survey responses between two groups.

Again, there were differences in the most frequent choices of superintendents and charter school leaders (Table 5). Charter school leaders were more likely to indicate that a lack of opportunities for general operating support has been a challenge (51%); they were also more likely to cite a lack of flexibility in the ways funds are used (29%). This may point to the challenges smaller schools face in accessing flexible, sustainable grant funds.

Table 5 Challenges of Working With Philanthropic Organizations, by District Leader Role

Superintendent	Charter School Leader
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out	There is a lack of opportunities for general operating support
There is misalignment of grant goals and district/school goals	We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out
The grant funding isn't enough to make a difference	The uses of funds aren't flexible

The leaders of large districts were more likely than those of small districts to report that grant funding isn't enough to make a difference (Table 6). Though other differences were not statistically significant, leaders of large rural districts were also more likely to report a lack of capacity to apply for funding and challenges sustaining grant-funded work when the funding runs out.

Table 6 Challenges of Working With Philanthropic Organizations, by Rural Designation

Small Rural District	Large Rural District
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out	It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out
There is a lack of opportunities for general operating support	The grant funding isn't enough to make a difference
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding
There is misalignment of grant goals and district/school goals	There is misalignment of grant goals and district/school goals

The Reasons Rural Schools Give for Not Partnering With Philanthropic Organizations Align With Challenges Cited by Those Who Do

We compared the reasons rural schools and districts don't partner with philanthropic organizations with the challenges cited by their counterparts that do partner with philanthropic organizations — and we found strong alignment (Table 7). Sustainability challenges appear among the responses of both sets of leaders — signaling the prevalence of these barriers among rural schools and districts, regardless of whether they partner with philanthropic organizations. Both groups also cited lack of capacity or resources to apply for funding.

This suggests that, regardless of whether rural charter school or district leaders have taken the plunge to partner with philanthropic organizations, doing so presents challenges of capacity and sustainability.

Table 7

Comparison Between Reasons for Not Partnering With Philanthropic Organizations and Challenges of Doing So

District or School <i>Doesn't</i> Partner with Philanthropic Organizations	District or School <i>Does</i> Partner with Philanthropic Organizations
Reasons	Challenges
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out
It's hard to identify philanthropic opportunities	There is a lack of opportunities for general operating support
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when the funding runs out	We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding

Recommendations for Philanthropic Organizations

The data from our *Support for Rural Colorado Schools* survey sheds light on the needs of rural charter school leaders and superintendents as the pandemic continues to evolve during the 2021-2022 school year. It also provides direction in how philanthropic organizations can best meet those needs:

- 1 Bring funding, networks, and creative solutions to address urgent staffing needs and shortages.
- 2 Keep grant application processes and reporting requirements at a minimum.
- 3 Stay flexible in grantmaking priorities to provide support across the myriad challenges rural communities are facing.
- 4 Support rural charter schools and districts in navigating the sustainability of their efforts, whether funded by philanthropic or public dollars.
- 5 Provide non-monetary support, including opportunities to connect and collaborate with those who are outside the school or district but equally dedicated to supporting the success of rural students.

1 Bring funding, networks, and creative solutions to address urgent staffing needs and shortages.

A large majority (64%) of district leaders said that addressing staffing shortages was chief among their needs. Talent shortages in rural Colorado districts have worsened over the past three years,¹⁸ and shortages for both certified teachers and other essential staff, including bus drivers and substitute teachers, could intensify in the 2022-2023 school year.¹⁹

Though the federal government recently directed billions of relief dollars to Colorado districts, nearly eight in 10 district leaders reported that additional financial support would help them address these urgent needs. This financial support could include a variety of approaches. For example, philanthropic organizations might invest in helping districts source out-of-system contractors to provide essential services to school districts, including providers for tutoring, agencies to manage food services, or programs that support community members in teaching on an ad hoc or part-time basis.

Given the specific challenge of salary competition between rural districts and their more urban counterparts, funders might also consider supporting the costs of temporary signing or retention bonuses, or offering financial support or thought partnership to help rural districts implement other solutions, like assisting the partners or spouses of educators to find employment in rural areas, or helping families locate affordable housing. For particularly dire shortages — like those for bus drivers and substitute teachers, along with those for instructional positions in elementary education, mathematics, and English language arts — philanthropy might consider additional supports, including tuition reimbursements, stipends to cover the cost of training and licensing, referral bonuses, and hiring and rehiring bonuses.

These are, of course, short-term solutions to a problem that's been compounding for years. Together, district leaders, educators, philanthropists, and other local experts could get at the root causes of this problem. We learned from our survey that one-third of district leaders are interested in opportunities to collaborate with other leaders to address challenges and share best practices. Philanthropic organizations might also invest in the work of existing networks of district leaders, or in developing new networks, in which district leaders can work together to address staffing challenges.

Funders can help create the time, space, and resources to allow them to do that together. An investment from funders could help bring district leaders together to brainstorm and test solutions. With philanthropic support, rural districts might also explore mechanisms to increase staff retention²⁰ or implement differentiated staffing models that help expand the reach of their current staff.²¹

2 Keep grant application processes and reporting requirements at a minimum.

Among district leaders who reported that their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations, 37% said they don't have enough capacity or resources to apply for funding, and 15% said the reporting requirements are too burdensome. Among district leaders who said they do work with funders, 20% said they don't have capacity or resources to apply for funding, and 11% said the reporting requirements are too burdensome. Philanthropic organizations that wish to support these districts should keep grant application processes and reporting requirements at a minimum. Easing the challenges related to application and reporting processes not only frees up time that district leaders might spend supporting students and educators but also removes barriers that keep rural districts from seeking the support they need.²²

Especially amid the early exigencies of the pandemic, but perhaps beyond it as well, philanthropic funders have found that streamlined application processes and reporting requirements will surface more potential rural partners for their work, increasing the ability of funds and resources to reach students furthest from opportunity.

3 Stay flexible in grantmaking priorities to provide support across the myriad challenges rural communities are facing.

Overall, leaders who completed our survey were less likely to report that they need support to meet families' basic needs, to help graduating students transition to college or career, or to provide technical support for online learning. That said, it's important to remember that needs range widely from region to region, between charter school leaders and superintendents, and between small and large rural districts. For simplicity in our survey, we asked leaders to share their broad perceptions about needs across entire districts or schools, with the knowledge that the gravity of these needs might vary among different groups of students, families, and educators. The needs that district leaders have reported are pressing for those they do affect, and funders should take note. Funders should be mindful of this in conversations and collaborations with charter and district leaders, seeking to learn about the ways needs impact students, families, or educators differently, and how meeting these needs might be most aligned with philanthropic priorities.

4 Support rural charter schools and districts in navigating the sustainability of their efforts, whether funded by philanthropic or public dollars.

Many leaders of schools and districts that don't partner with funders cite lack of sustainability as a primary reason — both in terms of sustaining work beyond grant periods and in a lack of general operating support. Leaders of schools and districts that do partner with funders cite these same reasons as challenges of doing so. This signals the universal prevalence of these barriers among rural schools and districts, regardless of whether they partner with philanthropic organizations.

The pandemic has catalyzed the work of funders who have come together to design leveraged and pooled funding initiatives, and philanthropy should make a long-term commitment to these approaches as a way of bolstering the sustainability of schools' and districts' work.

Leveraged funding approaches, in which philanthropic organizations invest in supports for schools and districts designed to help them attract or win additional funding, has already proven promising in rural Colorado through the Planning and Design Support (PDS) initiative. In September 2020, Colorado Governor Jared Polis used funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to launch the \$40.7 million Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) grant program. To ensure equitable access to RISE funding, a coalition of public and private actors, including the Colorado Governor's Office, the Gates Family Foundation, Gary Community Investments, The Anschutz Foundation, the Boettcher Foundation, and Lyra Colorado helped PDS grantees win \$12.7 million in RISE funding. Philanthropic funders should consider what they can learn from the PDS initiative as they commit to efforts to help rural districts secure public grant dollars.²³

Pooled funding and collaborative philanthropy also make it possible for funders to provide the long-term support and lasting commitment that ambitious outcomes and sustainable systemic change require. Funders have an opportunity to come together around shared goals and grantmaking processes, infusing new energy into addressing challenges, spurring innovation, and increasing the likelihood that their grantees will succeed in both the long and short term.

Collaborative philanthropy moves the work of offering districts strategic support, technical assistance, and capacity building from one funder to many, creating a model that pools not only financial resources but also expertise. Collaborative philanthropic endeavors also expand grantees' networks, exposing them to increased opportunities for support and new avenues for funding.

5 Provide non-monetary support, including opportunities to connect and collaborate with those who are outside the school or district but equally dedicated to supporting the success of rural students.

While district leaders reported that financial support and increased team capacity could help address their most urgent needs, they also indicated an interest in non-monetary support, including help finding new partners, increasing public will to take action, identifying opportunities to collaborate with other leaders, and garnering support from existing community partners.

For example, funders might invest in building districts' capacity to cultivate school-family-community partnerships. Partnerships like these are an effective way to bring families, local organizations, and business leaders together, both to build a stronger understanding of student and families' needs and assets, and to source community-based solutions to challenges. Funders might also consider supporting (or continuing their support for) rural district collaboratives. By fostering trusting, stable networks of support for district leaders, philanthropic organizations can help connect isolated rural district leaders and support ways to combine limited resources to address complex, shared challenges.

Finally, philanthropic organizations should consider investing in intermediaries who exist to support the work of rural schools and districts in Colorado. By facilitating relationships among district leaders, these intermediaries have built trust with rural districts and schools, and intimately understand their strengths, challenges, and contexts. Intermediaries can help address several challenges surfaced in our survey, including increasing district awareness of funding opportunities, and even playing a role in matching rural schools and districts with philanthropic opportunities that are most aligned with their needs.

Conclusion

It comes as no surprise that rural charter school and district leaders need support to stem the ever-rising tide of challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also won't surprise philanthropic organizations that in rural Colorado, there are more opportunities than challenges, just as there is far more hope than despair. Supporting rural schools and districts in meeting the needs of students and families allows philanthropic organizations to translate that opportunity and hope into a more promising future for the children of rural Colorado.



Appendix A: Methodology

Bellwether fielded the *Support for Rural Colorado Schools* survey from Oct. 18, 2021 to Oct. 29, 2021. We invited leaders from each rural district and charter school in Colorado to complete the survey. We also asked education organizations in Colorado to distribute an anonymous link to the survey to rural districts in their networks.

Colorado designates rural districts by considering the size of the district, its distance from the nearest large urban or urbanized area, and its student enrollment. *Large rural* districts are those that meet these criteria and have 6,500 students or fewer, while *small rural* districts have fewer than 1,000 students.²⁴ Colorado also organizes its 178 school districts into eight geographic regions.²⁵ We use these terms throughout this report as they are defined by Colorado.

We weighted survey responses to be more representative of the rural districts in the state (Table A1). To create the weights, we used a raked weighting approach to assign weights for each variable so the sample distribution aligned with the distribution of districts and/or school leaders in the state. The values in the right-most column, “Target Percent,” equal the distribution of each variable in Colorado. For each group of respondents, we adjusted the weight of survey responses for each group by multiplying the target percent by the total number of respondents. For example, 73% of rural districts in Colorado are classified as small rural districts. We multiplied the total number of survey responses (81) by the target percent (.73) to calculate the weighted count (59.13). While this method makes inferences somewhat more generalizable, results should still be interpreted with attention to the fact that they are founded on the responses of a discrete set of people at a specific moment in time.

Finally, we conducted pairwise tests to assess whether the weighted differences between or among each group were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. In the report, we limit our discussion of differences among groups to those that are statistically significant, unless otherwise noted.

Table A1
Survey Weighting Scheme

Respondents	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Percent	Weighted Count	Target Percent
District Leader				
Superintendent	70	86%	66.42	82%
Charter School Leader	11	14%	14.58	18%
Total	81	100%	81	100%
Rural Designation				
Small Rural District	58	72%	59.13	73%
Large Rural District	23	28%	21.87	27%
Total	81	100%	81	100%
Region				
North Central	8	10%	8.10	10%
Northeast	13	16%	17.82	22%
Northwest	11	14%	10.53	13%
Metropolitan	2	2%	2.43	3%
Pikes Peak	8	10%	8.10	10%
Southeast	9	11%	15.39	19%
Southwest	20	25%	12.15	15%
West Central	10	12%	6.48	8%
Total	81	100%	81	100%

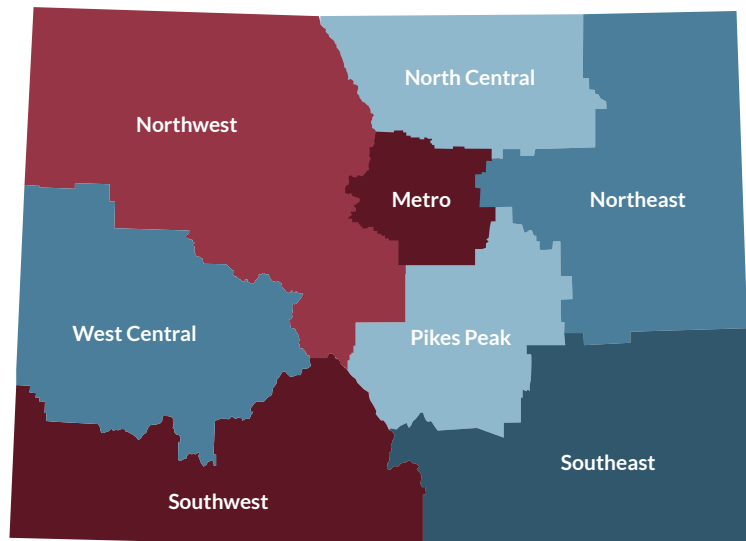
Appendix B: Regional Profiles

Colorado organizes its 178 school districts into eight geographic regions. Below, we report survey results for seven of those regions:

- North Central Region
- Northeast Region
- Northwest Region
- Pikes Peak Region
- Southeast Region
- Southwest Region
- West Central Region

Figure A1

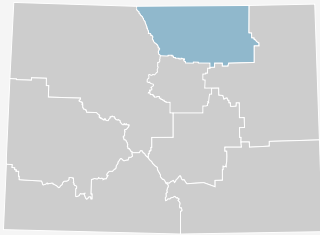
Colorado Department of Education Regional Designations



Source: “Regions,” Colorado Department of Education, www.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/rmapage.

At this level of analysis, the sample sizes are very low; it is important to remember that these results summarize the attitudes of a few individuals at a single point in time. Additionally, these summaries aren’t intended to overshadow the fact that families, educators, schools, and districts within each region have a wide range of urgent needs, which may or may not be reflected in the brief notes below.

In this section, we don’t report statistical differences between regional results, given the wide range in response rates by region. Finally, results for the Metropolitan region aren’t included because of the low sample size.



8

Number of Survey Responses

53%

Survey Response Rate

North Central Region: Summary

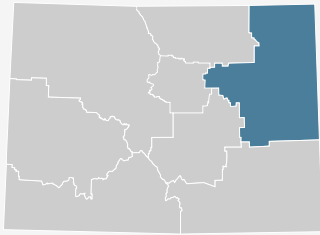
- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for students and families.
 - > Providing academic support for students.
- For the most part, districts plan to use public funds to meet these needs, though a majority of district and school leaders indicated that additional financial support would be helpful to them. This is true in all regions of Colorado.
- Many leaders also reported that increased team capacity and implementation support would be helpful.
- Six of eight leaders said that their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations. These leaders report challenges identifying opportunities and sustaining grant-funded work when philanthropic funding runs out as reasons why.

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Top Three Needs	Top Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	63%	13%	13%	63%
Providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families	63%	25%	0%	38%
Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction	50%	38%	0%	38%

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Financial support	75%
Increased team capacity or staffing	63%
Implementation support	63%

North Central Region, *continued*

Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	25%
No	75%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
It's hard to identify philanthropic opportunities	63%
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	38%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Positive relationships with program officers	13%
Flexible uses of funding	13%
Opportunities for capacity-building	13%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
The grant funding isn't enough to make a difference	13%
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	13%
None	13%



13

Number of Survey Responses

41%

Survey Response Rate

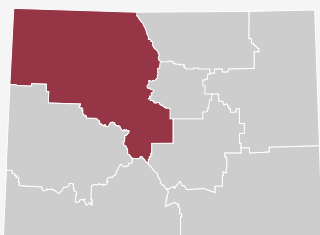
Northeast Region: Summary

- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
 - > Providing academic support for students.
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for students and families.
- For the most part, districts plan to use public funds to meet these needs, though a majority of district and school leaders indicated that additional financial support and increased team capacity would be helpful to them.
- About half of the leaders who responded to our survey indicated that their school or district partners with philanthropic organizations; the other half don't.
- Among the reasons some leaders said their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations are a lack of capacity or resources to do so and a lack of flexibility in how funds may be used.
- Many leaders who reported that their school or district works with funders said that the flexibility of funding has been a benefit of these partnerships.

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Top Three Needs	Top Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	69%	38%	15%	69%
Providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families	62%	23%	0%	23%
Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction	46%	8%	0%	31%

Northeast Region, *continued*

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Financial support	77%
Increased team capacity or staffing	62%
Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	46%
No	54%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	31%
The uses of funds aren't flexible	31%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Flexible uses of funding	31%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
The grant funding isn't enough to make a difference	15%
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	15%
None	15%



11

Number of Survey Responses

58%

Survey Response Rate

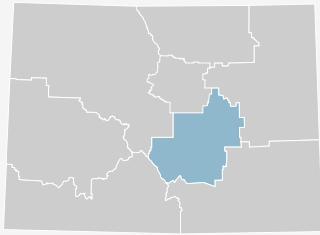
Northwest Region: Summary

- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for students and families.
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for educators.
- Leaders were more likely than those in other regions to say providing mental health or emotional support services for students, families, and educators was among their most urgent needs.
- For the most part, districts plan to use public funds to meet these needs, though a majority of district and school leaders indicated that additional financial support and increased team capacity would be helpful to them.
- Nearly three-quarters of leaders who responded to our survey indicated that their school or district works with philanthropic organizations.
- Many leaders who said their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations pointed to challenges identifying opportunities and sustaining grant-funded work when philanthropic funding runs out as reasons why.
- Most leaders who reported that their school or district works with funders said that they've benefited from positive relationships with program officers. They also indicated that finding the capacity or resources to apply for funding has been a challenge.

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Top Three Needs	Top Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Providing mental health/emotional support services for students or families	100%	27%	9%	27%
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	73%	36%	18%	73%
Providing mental health/emotional support services for educators	46%	0%	9%	18%

Northwest Region, *continued*

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Financial support	64%
Increased team capacity or staffing	64%
Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	73%
No	27%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	27%
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	27%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Positive relationships with program officers	55%
Ability to access funding quickly	46%
Opportunities for capacity building	46%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	55%



8

Number of Survey Responses

53%

Survey Response Rate

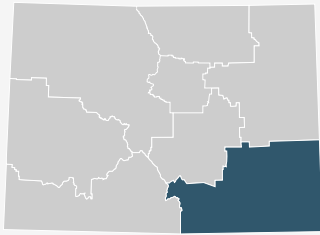
Pikes Peak Region: Summary

- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for students and families.
 - > Providing academic support for students.
- Leaders were more likely than those in other regions to say that addressing staffing needs or shortages and providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction were among their most urgent needs.
- Every leader who responded to our survey indicated that they plan to use public funds to meet these needs.
- A majority of district and school leaders indicated that additional financial support and increased team capacity would be helpful to them.
- Half of the leaders who responded to our survey indicated that their school or district partners with philanthropic organizations; the other half don't.
- Half of leaders who said their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations pointed to challenges identifying opportunities and the lack of capacity to apply for funding as reasons why.
- Many leaders who reported that their school or district partners with funders said that they've benefited from opportunities to connect with others, positive relationships with program officers, and the flexibility of grant funds. More than half indicated that sustaining grant-funded work when funding runs out has been a challenge.

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Three Most Urgent Needs	Most Urgent Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	88%	63%	0%	88%
Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction	63%	25%	0%	50%
Providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families	38%	0%	0%	38%

Pikes Peak Region, *continued*

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Increased team capacity or staffing	88%
Financial support	75%
Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	50%
No	50%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
It's hard to identify philanthropic opportunities	50%
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	50%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Opportunities to connect with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges	38%
Positive relationships with program officers	38%
Flexible uses of funding	38%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	50%



9

Number of Survey Responses

32%

Survey Response Rate

Southeast Region: Summary

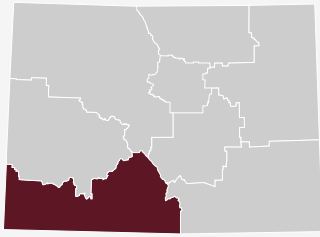
- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for students and families.
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.²⁶
- One in five leaders who responded to our survey indicated that they don't plan to use public funds to address staffing shortages.
- Every leader who responded to our survey indicated that increased team capacity or staffing would be helpful to them. Many leaders reported that additional financial support and opportunities to collaborate with other leaders would also be helpful.
- Fewer than half of leaders who responded to our survey indicated that their school or district partners with philanthropic organizations.
- Several leaders who said their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations pointed to challenges identifying opportunities and the lack of capacity to apply for funding as reasons why.
- Some leaders who reported that their school or district partners with funders said they've faced challenges due to misalignment between grant goals and school or district goals, along with challenges sustaining grant-funded work when funding runs out

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Top Three Needs	Top Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Providing mental health/emotional support services for students or families	67%	0%	22%	56%
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	44%	22%	0%	44%

Note: In the Southeast region, multiple needs were tied for the third rank and aren't indicated here.

Southeast Region, *continued*

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Financial support	100%
Increased team capacity or staffing	78%
Opportunities to collaborate with other leaders to address challenges and share best practices	56%
Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	44%
No	56%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
It's hard to identify philanthropic opportunities	56%
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	56%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Opportunities to connect with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges	22%
Minimal reporting requirements	22%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Grant goals and district/school goals aren't aligned	44%
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	44%



20

Number of Survey Responses

91%

Survey Response Rate

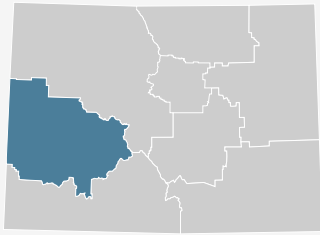
Southwest Region: Summary

- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
 - > Improving student attendance or engagement in learning.
 - > Providing academic support for students.
- Leaders were more likely than those in other regions to say that improving student attendance or engagement in learning was among their most urgent needs.
- One in five leaders who responded to our survey indicated that they don't plan to use public funds to address staffing shortages.
- Many leaders reported that additional financial support and increased team capacity or staffing would be helpful to them.
- Fewer than half of leaders who responded to our survey indicated that their school or district partners with philanthropic organizations.
- Several leaders who said their school or district doesn't partner with philanthropic organizations pointed to challenges sustaining grant-funded work and a lack of capacity to apply for funding as reasons why.
- Some leaders who reported that their school or district partners with funders said they've benefited from flexible uses of funding and the ability to access funding quickly.
- Leaders also reported that they've faced challenges in working with funders, including problems sustaining grant-funded work and a lack of general operating support, along with a lack of capacity or resources to apply for funding.

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Top Three Needs	Top Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	60%	25%	20%	60%
Improving student attendance or engagement in learning	55%	20%	5%	50%
Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction	40%	10%	0%	20%

Southwest Region, *continued*

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Financial support	90%
Increased team capacity or staffing	60%
Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	35%
No	65%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	45%
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	40%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Flexible uses of funding	35%
Ability to access funding quickly	30%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	30%
There is a lack of opportunities for general operating support	25%
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	25%



10

Number of Survey Responses

91%

Survey Response Rate

West Central Region: Summary

- Leaders indicated that their most urgent needs include:
 - > Addressing staffing needs or shortages.
 - > Providing mental health or emotional support services for students and families.
 - > Providing academic support for students.
- One in five leaders who responded to our survey indicated that they don't plan to use public funds to address staffing shortages.
- Many leaders reported that additional financial support and increased team capacity or staffing, along with help finding new partners, would be helpful to them.
- Leaders in this region were more likely than those in other regions to say that their school or district works with philanthropic organizations.
- Leaders who said their school or district partners with funders reported a range of benefits, chief among them flexible uses of funding.
- Half of leaders reported that they've faced challenges in working with funders, including problems sustaining grant-funded work and a lack of general operating support.

Which of the following describe the three most urgent needs your district or school is facing?	Among Top Three Needs	Top Need	Will Not Use Public Funds to Meet Needs	Not Aware of Philanthropic Funding to Address Needs
Addressing staffing needs or shortages	80%	50%	20%	70%
Providing mental health or emotional support services for students or families	70%	20%	0%	60%
Providing academic support for students to address the impact of interrupted instruction	40%	20%	10%	40%

What kinds of additional support would be helpful to you or your school(s)?	
Increased team capacity or staffing	80%
Financial support	70%
Finding new partners	50%

West Central Region, *continued*

Does your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
Yes	80%
No	20%
Why doesn't your district or school partner with philanthropic organizations?	
It's hard to identify philanthropic opportunities	20%
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	20%
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	20%
What benefits have you experienced from working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
Flexible uses of funding	40%
Opportunities to connect with others who do similar work or are facing the same challenges	30%
Positive relationships with program officers	30%
Ability to access funding quickly	30%
Minimal reporting requirements	30%
What kinds of challenges have you experienced in working with philanthropic organizations, if any?	
It's hard to sustain grant-funded work when funding runs out	50%
There is a lack of opportunities for general operating support	50%
We don't have enough capacity or resources (people, funding, support, or time) to apply for funding	40%
The grant funding isn't enough to make a difference	40%

Endnotes

- 1 "Colorado School District Community Needs Inventory" Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Education Initiative, December 2020, www.cde.state.co.us/safeschools/communityneeds.
- 2 Because the survey was distributed anonymously, we cannot calculate exact response rates. At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked whether they are the leader of a rural school district or rural charter school. Assuming only one respondent per district or school completed the survey, we calculated the response rate by dividing the number of survey responses by the total number of rural districts or charter schools in the state. See more about the survey sample and methods in Appendix A.
- 3 We weighted survey responses to be more representative of the rural districts in the state. See Appendix A for more information.
- 4 "Teacher Shortages Across the Nation and Colorado," Colorado Department of Higher Education, December 2017, highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/teachereducation/2017/TeacherShortages_Nation_Colorado_Dec2017.pdf.
- 5 "Colorado's Educator Shortage Survey Results," Colorado Department of Education, 2021, www.cde.state.co.us/educatortalent/edshortage-surveyresults.
- 6 "Driver Shortage Survey," National Association for Pupil Transportation, National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, National School Transportation Association, August 31, 2021.
- 7 "Colorado School District Community Needs Inventory," Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Education Initiative, December 2020, www.cde.state.co.us/safeschools/communityneeds.
- 8 "Colorado's Educator Shortage Survey Results," Colorado Department of Education, 2021, www.cde.state.co.us/educatortalent/edshortage-surveyresults.
- 9 "Urban and Rural Districts Showed a Strong Divide During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results From the Second American School District Panel Survey," RAND, 2021, www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-2.html.
- 10 Colorado organizes its 178 school districts into eight geographic regions. We use these terms throughout this report as they are defined by Colorado. See more: "Regions," Colorado Department of Education, www.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/rgmapage. Also, in this section, we don't report statistical differences between regional results, given the wide range in response rates by region.
- 11 See Appendix B for more detailed survey results by region.
- 12 In the North Central region, two choices were tied for second rank. In the Southeast region, multiple choices were tied for the third rank and aren't indicated here.
- 13 Author's calculation based on publicly available data from the Colorado Department of Education. This figure includes funding from the state's Education Stabilization Fund Program for fiscal year 2020-2021 and allocations districts received in the distribution of supplemental state reserve funds. This figure excludes broadband/Wi-Fi funds and funds designated for providing supports and services to Native American or special education students.
- 14 Note that per-pupil funding differs dramatically among rural districts. In fiscal year 2020-2021, relief dollars for rural districts ranged from \$253 to \$10,831.
- 15 Tammy Kolbe, et al., "The Additional Cost of Operating Rural Schools: Evidence From Vermont," AERA Open, January 2021, journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858420988868.
- 16 Meagan Batdorf, et al., "Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands," University of Arkansas, April 2014, www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/charter-funding-inequity-expands.pdf; "Colorado," National Association for Public Charter Schools, www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/colorado.
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- 18 "Colorado's Educator Shortage Survey Results," Colorado Department of Education, 2021, www.cde.state.co.us/educatortalent/edshortage-surveyresults.
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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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